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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the nature of educational reform and recommends strategies to better reflect the needs of rural schools and their communities. The furor over education reform is largely produced by those who stand to gain from it, including politicians who promote their own agendas and consultants, professors, and experts who make a good living from promoting educational improvement. However, the facts are that schools are not as bad as they have been portrayed; that Goals 2000 is political and not relevant to real students and communities; that schools are not the only answer to improving American society, a task more complicated than increasing international economic competitiveness; that educational policy suited to an industrial society has been detrimental to rural America; and that sustainable education in communities is necessary for improvement in American society. Across the nation, communities and schools are beginning to create sustainable education based on the particular needs of the community. For example, schools are serving as family resource centers that coordinate services to meet a range of student and family needs. Schools are becoming involved in community development programs that encourage the revitalization of rural communities and the restructuring of rural schools. Sustainable education reform should build on the strength and knowledge of local people and provide them with the tools to manage effective change; be diverse in meeting unique community needs; have at its center the support of an individual or small group; recognize limits and operate within them; be multifaceted and attend to issues of purpose, content, rules, roles, and responsibilities; be inclusive and involve all members of the community; be grounded in research on how people learn and are most effectively taught; and be driven by a fundamental trust in the capacity of people to identify and celebrate local strengths and resources. Contains 25 references. (LP)

# BETTER TOGETHER: RURAL SCHOOLS AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

by Toni Haas

# Better Together: Rural Schools and Rural Communities

**Toni Haas**

*Editors Note: This paper is an excerpt from a panel discussion on rural education at NCREL's Regional Rural Advisory Council Meeting, which took place March 1994 in Galena, Illinois.*

I began teaching in 1964 in Lake Benton, a rural school in western Minnesota. In the 30 years since then, I've worked at the state and federal levels helping craft educational policies that give rural kids—like I had been—a fair shake and that recognize the strengths, as well as the weaknesses, of rural communities. A year and a half ago, I left my job with the Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory (McREL) because I had hit a wall. I was exhausted and despondent. And I was frustrated, because it seemed to me that as hard as my colleagues and I were working, the best efforts of very talented and well-intentioned people didn't seem to be making any significant difference in real lives of real people in real communities.

I was very lucky. I had saved some money and could live off of that while I caught my breath and figured out what I wanted to do next. For the first weeks, I got very sick. (I had worked steadily for 29 years and apparently getting sick was the only way my German upbringing could allow me some decompression time.) As I recovered, I began to read—first all of the things that had piled up on the "someday I mean to get to that" pile, then more widely. In some scholarly journal (I think it was *Vanity Fair*), I came across a story about the entertainment wizard, David Geffen. The story rather breathlessly reported—in the way that they do—that in every meeting, Geffen asks his staff, "What are we not letting ourselves know about this?" That's how I'd like to begin with you today, with a discussion of what we aren't letting ourselves know about schooling in rural communities.

## What Are We Not Letting Ourselves Know?

The first thing that we are not letting ourselves know is that the furor over education reform is serving important, largely invisible purposes that are not exclusively educational. One purpose is political. We all know that political capital is made in headlines. The darker the news, the more likely it is to rate time on the nightly news or on the front page. Education was discovered by the politicians in the early 1980s. Politicians of every stripe quickly vied to see who could be tougher in education reform, identifying and deploring the current educational system. Conservatives, for example, felt that "straightening out" public education was one way to restore order and security to a world that seemed disorderly, chaotic, and confusing—a situation that required "cleaning up" the liberal excesses of the previous decade.

In addition to politicians, an entire industry has grown up around school improvement and reform. Faster even than the proliferation of lawyers has been the growing number of consultants, professors, and itinerant experts—among them my dear colleagues and myself—all of whom make good livings by helping to spread the word that the system is broken and needs their particular brand of fixing.

The most widely practiced response has been to tighten down. We restore order by insisting on more of what used to work: more hours, more credits, higher standards, more rigor for students and for teachers. We even call it "Back to Basics." This approach is called "first order change"—do more of what got you in trouble in the first place.

Thus, the first thing that we are not letting ourselves know is that some of the angst about schools in this country is being manufactured by people for their own reasons. A corollary is that what is perceived to be "broken" in the education system is coincidentally congruent with what the fixers can do to fix it. This phenomenon is the old "if you give a kid a hammer, everything needs pounding" notion. How does this situation relate to schools and communities? Each September, evidence supporting this contention is found in the Gallup polls showing that parents are increasingly troubled by the state of education in the country, but remain convinced that their local school—the school that they know best—is doing a fine job.

The second thing that we are not letting ourselves know is how crazy it can make us to be living in the middle of a paradigm shift and moving from an industrial to a post-industrial—or information—age. The economy is less local and more global (a phenomenon that can be observed on every small town main street in this region). Decisions are made from a distance, and individuals feel little influence over the decisions that affect their lives. Even the discussion seems more abstract.

The main sources of education for young people used to be the family, the church, the school, and the community. But when both parents work outside of the home, day care providers and TV fill the gap. When economics in rural areas mean that both parents work away from home, commuting time limits the time and energy that parents have to participate in church, school, and community activities. More working adults mean fewer community members are available to take a casual interest in the upbringing of youngsters, and the influence of church and community can wane. That leaves only the school.

The second thing that we are not letting ourselves know is how much the choices we are making based on economics, over which we have no control, are influencing all of the other areas of our lives. Parents from my generation have a sense of failure, because our children are not guaranteed to do "better" than we have done economically. Rather than worry about glass ceilings, my daughters and my son are trapped by the "sticky floor," working at entry-level jobs with little security and less chance for advancement. They and many others are beginning to rethink what "enough" is and what economic sufficiency means; they are beginning to trade off economic advantage for the value of relationships, family, free time, and civic involvement.

## What Do We Know?

We know that schools are not as bad as they have been portrayed (which is not to say that they can't be better), and we know that economic and social choices influence one another. Here are some other things that we know:

We are not going to meet Goals 2000 by the year 2000. What we need to remember is that these goals are not our goals—they are political goals. The ideas are not terrible (they have to be fairly innocuous to get through the political process), but they have little to connect them to real students and real lives in real communities. Rather, they are useful in preparing work forces to operate in organizations that are already outmoded.

We know that schools cannot be the only answer to improving American society, and that the task is a great deal more complicated than increasing America's international economic competitiveness.

We know that the pressure for more standardization—tightening down the system that served the industrial age—is not the first time that education policies have not matched the needs of schools in rural America. Education policy that suited an industrial society—practiced in this country for the past century—has been devastating to rural America. It created schools as extractive industries, investing local property taxes to train young people who left the area and made their contributions elsewhere.

We need to think about making education sustainable in communities rather than a drain on them, because another thing we know is that any improvement in American society—in how we live together—must begin and focus on communities. We know that children are the future of communities, and therefore communities must find ways to rear their children, to sustain them so that they can sustain communities.

*No child can escape his community. He may not like his parents, or the neighbors or the ways of the world. He may groan under the processes of living, and wish he were dead. But he goes on living, and he goes on living in the community. The life of the community flows about him, foul or pure; he swims in it, drinks it, goes to sleep in it, and wakes to the new day to find it still about him. He belongs to it; it nourishes him, or starves him, or poisons him; it gives him the substance of his life. And in the long run it takes its toll of him, and all he is.*

*The democratic problem in education is not primarily a problem of training children; it is a problem of māking a community within which children cannot help growing up to be democratic, intelligent, disciplined to freedom, reverent of the goods of life, and eager to share in the tasks of the age. A school cannot produce this result; nothing but a community can do so (Hart, 1970).*

## Sustainable Education

According to my well-worn *American Heritage Dictionary*, the word *sustain* means "to keep in existence; maintain; prolong." The second meaning is "to supply with necessities or nourishment; to provide for." Third is "to support from below; keep from falling or sinking."

Across this region, and across the country, communities and schools are creating, inventing sustainable education. Each of these inventions is unique, suited to a particular community. They are described in detail in *Public Schools That Work*, a book that Greg Smith edited and for which I wrote the concluding chapter. Briefly, these approaches follow three models. The first model treats schools as family resource centers that coordinate services to meet the entire range of student and family needs. Kentucky, Texas, Connecticut, New Jersey, and Colorado are among the leaders in this area, and the *Public Schools That Work* provides detailed descriptions of programs in Denver and Leadville, Colorado.

Many—though not all—of the needs served by family resource center schools are the result of hard economic times. The second model of community involvement addresses this issue directly by making economic development an organizing framework for the school. Paul Nachtigal and I began one such effort in South Dakota called Rural Schools and Community Development. Doug Thomas and the Center for School Change in Minnesota have received a substantial grant from the Blandon Foundation to help rural schools become partners in economic development. They are creating student entrepreneurs both to revitalize rural communities and to restructure rural schools. Finally, REAL Enterprises, which Jonathan Sher and Paul DeLargy began in three Southern states, now has members in North and South Carolina and Georgia and provisional members or local sites in Vermont, Ohio, West Virginia, Alabama, Wisconsin, Minnesota, South Dakota, Oklahoma, Wyoming, Oregon, Washington, and Alaska.

In Alabama, Jack Shelton and Robin Lambert operate the Program of Rural Services and Research, which involves 32 rural communities working on community development. They blend the approaches of the Minnesota Center for School Change and REAL Enterprises and focus on "doing well by doing good." They call the work that focuses on economic development "learning to dig our own wells." They have built solar greenhouses, set up organic gardens, and created markets for their produce in urban areas through a network of churches. They also have trained construction crews of both girls and boys and are building new houses and retrofitting old ones to improve rural housing stock. At the same time, they have worked with the Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) to ensure that local people can qualify for low-cost loans to purchase the property that they have created.

The projects that focus on economic development also assume responsibility for teaching young people about economics, and they do so in a very real way, emphasizing how economic decisions affect their lives and the life of their community.

The third model involves schools as partners in community development. In this model, the purpose of the school is to prepare young people to be economically and civically productive citizens and to contribute to the development of the community. It emphasizes both individual and collective benefits. Our cultural environment is no less important to community development than our economic or physical environment, yet many of us live in communities where the cultural endowment has been devalued and stripped away by inattention, competing

priorities, and the seductions of the mass media.

One good way to begin to recapture the cultural endowment of a community is to ask simple questions: What can grandparents do that their grandchildren can't? What do they know that the children don't? The resulting list of lost skills and knowledge becomes the beginning of an effort to redevelop and renew the rich local culture of the area. Community histories, created with written, audio, and video media, can aspire to be more than anecdotal (the richest example is the 20-year history of Foxfire). These histories provide cultural analysis based on information provided to student compilers. Students use photographs for documentary and artistic expression. School/community newspapers that cover local news and serve underserved communities and families that lack other reading materials are, according to the Freedom Foundation, "at the cutting edge" of student journalism. Community Study Centers link communities to public libraries and other information sources (and give young people a very clear message about the importance and joy of learning).

In this model, the community serves as a locus of learning. The community is the context in which learning takes place and is shaped. Community members are coaches and mentors. The community provides opportunity for service, sites for research and analysis, and a fellowship of adults who value and continue learning themselves. The learning community is rich with contact between young people and adults.

In Soldiers Grove, Wisconsin, fourth graders have created and maintain a city park. Nebraska students of Linda Abboud designed and built a mural in the town park that traces the history of the area from prehistoric times. In Alabama and South Dakota, students are collecting oral histories and creating pageants for public performance. Alabama students write and distribute a newspaper that reports on school and local community news, filling in for the missing town paper.

## Characteristics of Sustainable Education Reform

Let me suggest some principles for sustainable education reform. Because such reform suggests a new way to look at change efforts, these principles are tentative. What you learn from your work will add to what we think we know. Here is what we think we know so far:

*Sustainable education reform is a process.* It builds on the strength and knowledge of local people, giving them the tools to accept responsibility for their future and fate. It requires learning a balance between self-sufficiency and the savvy to create enough space in the existing system to do what you need to do. It also seeks a balance between private gain and public value.

*Sustainable education reform is diverse and not generic.* It will become manifest in different ways in different communities. The first thing that these grassroots experiments have in common is that they have precious little in common. Each is unique and appears to be successful to the extent that it meets the needs of its unique context, whether that context is on the prairies of western Minnesota or in the Appalachian hollers of Alabama.

*Each experiment has at its center an individual or small group of individuals investing enormous amounts of energy.* Change needs a champion who can find and mobilize like-minded people. Marty Strange of the Center for Rural Affairs (1992) says, "If it is a good idea, you don't have to sell it. Rather, put your energy into supporting, organizing people who already believe in it."

*Sustainable education reform is concrete.* It values its local, unique context and considers the community to be a laboratory in which the most rigorous of academic lessons can be learned and evaluated in authentic and public ways. It prepares young people to live and work as adults, giving them opportunities to practice adult ways of working, learning, being responsible, and participating in the community. Based in a real community, it is practical. It recognizes real limits and operates within them.

*Sustainable education reform is multi-faceted.* It attends to issues of purpose, content, rules, roles, and responsibilities in dynamic, iterative ways that act upon the knowledge that everything is connected to everything else.

*Sustainable education reform is inclusive.* It involves all members of the community and recognizes each young person as having unlimited and undetermined value and potential. It does not set up organizational mechanisms to sort children into winners and losers.

*Sustainable education reform is rigorous.* It is intellectually grounded in research on cognition (how people learn) and instruction (how they are most effectively taught). Learning to learn is as important as learning specific content.

*Sustainable education reform is deeply moral.* It is driven by a fundamental trust and belief in the capacity of people (young and old) to identify and celebrate local strengths and resources, to identify and solve their problems, and to create a balance between benefits to individual and communities. As Cornelia Flora (1992) says, "It is socially just, environmentally sound and economically viable."

My charge to you is to go about your planning with high hopes and clear visions. Let yourselves know what you know about the beauty, importance, and possibilities for your communities, and figure out ways to help your young people experience the joy of belonging to something bigger than themselves. You will improve the education of all of your citizens as you expand the mission of the school "to keep in existence; maintain; prolong" the life of your community. You will find new and innovative ways "to support from below; keep from falling or sinking" and "to supply with necessities or nourishment; to provide for" your children.

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